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ABSTRACT

This article describes efforts by Plymouth State College (PSC), New Hampshire, to improve the writing deficiencies of otherwise qualified candidates for teacher education programs. The study examined students' perceptions of writing at PSC, which uses an integrated model to improve writing. Writing is assessed during first-year orientation. Students scoring below a certain level are required to enroll in specially designed sections of English composition. These special sections are smaller than typical compositions classes and have a graduate assistant assigned to them. They use a Writing Center as part of their compositions class. Faculty advisors provide support and monitoring throughout the student's program. Through early identification and intervention, student writing concerns are systematically addressed and supported. Participating students completed a survey on their perceptions of: the degree to which faculty and courses worked to improve their writing; their use of support services; opportunities provided by education courses for improving their writing; themselves as writers; and the importance of writing in connection with their career goals. Students perceived that their writing development was enhanced by the course's frequent, meaningful writing assignments, which were carefully read by faculty who in turn provided timely, substantive feedback. (SM)

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Running Head: IMPROVING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' WRITING

Improving Pre-Service Teachers' Writing:

A View from Students

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Abstract

College and university teacher education programs are charged with developing in preservice teachers the competencies necessary to be able to teach a wide range of skills. One central process in this responsibility is writing. Seniors graduating from high school and those admitted to colleges as first-year students write at disconcertingly low levels (Manzo, 1999). Teacher education programs need to ensure that students whose writing may not be at acceptable levels upon entry to college are able to attend to those deficiencies during their college years. If this occurs, then they will be able to teach not only writing, but the many content areas which depend upon writing proficiency.

This article describes one college's efforts to attend to the writing deficiencies of otherwise qualified candidates for teacher education programs. Through early identification and intervention, student writing concerns are addressed and supported in a systematic manner. Further, student perceptions of what is helpful to them and what detracts from their ability to develop their writing skills are investigated and the results are reported. The findings support that students perceive their writing development is enhanced by frequent, meaningful writing assignments that are carefully read by faculty who in turn provide timely and substantive feedback.

IMPROVING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' WRITING: A VIEW FROM STUDENTS

Donald Super, in his meta-theory on career development, suggests that the process of career development is one of progressively implementing one's self-concept into the world of work. In his later work, he emphasized the importance of specific role self-concepts. The notion of role self-concepts comes from the constructivist tradition, which suggests that individuals develop or construct what they believe about themselves within the context of life roles such as worker, student, family member (Super, 1990). An important variable in this process is the meaning people make out of their interactions with important others in their lives. One of the most relevant role self-concepts in the development of pre-service teachers involves what they believe about themselves academically. It seems reasonable to suggest that this academic self-concept is an important variable in their transformation from receivers of instruction as college students to providers of instruction as teachers. How this transformation occurs has implications for teacher preparation programs. Specifically, it is important to know how students view themselves as readers, writers, mathematicians, and resolvers of conflict and what influences the views they hold.

Teacher Educators' Attention to Writing

Research suggests that at the upper high school level, student writing is far from excellent (Manzo, 1999) and that such student writing is of concern to faculty. (Sartain et. al, 1982; Harris, 1982; Nakamura, 1984; Holladay, 1981). For example, The National Assessment Governing Board, an independent judge of education standards, reported that only 22 percent of 12th grade students are proficient writers. Given the number of students entering college per annum, it is probable that many non-proficient students enter college

each year. It is also probable that some non-proficient writers enter teacher education. Despite their non-proficiency, many have the potential to be excellent teachers. The interventions teacher educators provide to students are crucial in influencing positively their skills and beliefs about themselves as writers. To prepare students with the skills they need for their roles as teachers, teacher educators need initially to select instructional paradigms that match the developmental level at which pre-service teachers enter.

Within the field of teacher education, professors and instructors are faced with the task of teaching college students, many of whom are not proficient writers themselves, how to teach children to write. This task is made difficult by the sometimes negative attitude these students have towards writing. These attitudes on the part of preservice teachers, if they persist, can become an entrenched and negative part of their own academic self-concept. Following Super's notions relative to career development, it is fair to suggest that this negative aspect of their academic/writing self-concept gets implemented into their work roles as teachers. In other words, teachers who are poor writers and lack confidence are less likely to inspire good writing and positive attitudes towards writing in their students.

Given this background, the researchers investigated student perceptions of themselves as writers. The purposes were to augment the professional literature which, while replete with information on how to teach writing, was notoriously silent on student perceptions of themselves as writers and on the methods and techniques that influence those skills and perceptions (Whittington, 1998). In the current article, the researchers at one institution investigated how students viewed themselves as writers, what programs

and types of instruction helps them get better at writing, and what hinders their development as writers.

A Program to Improve Student Writing

The researchers sought to understand student perceptions regarding writing at Plymouth State College (PSC) in New Hampshire. Like many state colleges, PSC is not an elite institution, but one that attracts a diversity of students, including many first generation college students. As such, its percentage of writers in need of assistance is similar to national trends. For instance, the National Assessment report cited above found only 22 percent of twelfth students at or above the proficient level (Manzo, 1999). Likewise, twenty percent of incoming first year students at PSC interested in working with children professionally scored as proficient writers on assessment given by faculty. PSC has been concerned about student writing for some time, and since 1986 has had a writing across the curriculum program in place (Miller, Boland, & Hinman, 1993).

PSC uses an integrated model to improve writing. Writing is assessed during first-year orientation. Students scoring below a designated score are required to enroll in specially-designed sections of English Composition. These special sections are smaller than typical Composition sections and have a graduate assistant funded by the Education Department assigned to them. These students use the Writing Center as a required part of their Composition class (see sidebar). Faculty advisors provide support and monitoring throughout the student's program.

Method

The researchers designed a survey to gather information about the experiences and attitudes towards writing of students majoring in childhood and early childhood studies at

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Plymouth State College. Students in selected courses completed the surveys. The questionnaire gathered background information about the gender and year in school of the student. It asked whether the student had taken a specially designed section of English Composition as a result of their score on the above-mentioned writing assessment. The students then answered eleven questions about writing and their attitudes toward writing. Respondents were asked to record their responses on a Likert-type scale, where 1 indicated that they strongly disagreed with the statement and 5 corresponded to strong agreement with the statement. Finally, the survey asked two open-ended questions about helpful and deleterious influences on students' writing. The questions were designed to learn more about students' perceptions and experiences as writers and how faculty interventions affect student writing development. In turn, the survey sought to understand how this development affects student attitudes about writing and the importance of writing in their profession.

Sample

The sample was determined by an examination of Education Department courses most likely to yield a large sample size. The goal was to survey students primarily in their second, third and fourth years, a time by which they would have had a significant number of experiences related to interventions in their writing processes. Surveys and informed consent forms were given to instructors in separate envelopes to ensure anonymity. The instructors were requested to administer the surveys in the selected classes during class time. A total of 166 students completed surveys.

All of the 166 students were in the second year or later in college. The vast majority (156) were second, third or fourth year students, with the greatest concentration

(75) in the third year. Most of the students (82%) were female. Fourteen percent reported that they had taken a specially designed section of English Composition, 66% that they had not, and 20% did not know.

Findings from Likert Scale Data

The data were analyzed with the aid of Microsoft Excel 7.0. Totals, means and distributions of answers were determined for the eleven Likert-type questions. The qualitative, open-ended questions were arranged and analyzed according to logical categories.

The results are reported in Table 1. Question one investigated students' perceptions of the degree to which faculty and courses work to improve student writing. Sixty-one percent of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the department faculty work to improve their writing. The second question asked if students perceive that Education courses provide sufficient opportunity to improve their writing. Here, 73 percent agreed or strongly agreed. Thus, a majority of students believe professors and courses help them improve.

Assessing student use of support services was the next question. It asked about students' use of the two Centers on campus available to assist them with their writing. Only thirty-one percent of students reported using the Centers when needed. How to increase student use of centers is an important question facing those in higher education.

Most colleges require an English Composition class to help students attain college level writing proficiency. The fifth question asked students to report their perceptions about whether their English Composition class helped improve their writing. Just over half (51%) agreed or strongly agreed that it had. Tellingly, a higher percentage of those

students in the special sections of composition, 70% to 57%, felt their composition class helped them improve (the percentages are skewed by students unsure of their composition class; only 30% of them felt their class was helpful).

The researchers also examined students' perceptions of themselves as writers in relation to their college education and their chosen career path as professionals working with children. Seventy-eight percent of students either agreed or strongly agreed that their writing ability improved over the course of their education. Sixty-five percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that attitudes toward writing had improved while they were at college. Interestingly a higher percentage of students reported that their skills had improved than reported that their attitudes toward writing improved. Clearly the two, while related, are not the same thing.

The researchers also sought to understand students' perceptions regarding the importance of writing in connection with their career goals of working with children. Eighty-two percent of respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I believe it is important for professionals working with children to be good writers. Likewise an overwhelming majority of students (97%) agreed or strongly agreed that "it is important for professionals working with children to have a positive attitude towards writing."

The last two questions asked participants to apply the previous beliefs to themselves. Eighty-two percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that they have a positive attitude about writing. Sixty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I like to write".

Findings from Open-ended Questions

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We asked students to help us understand, from their perspective, what helps and hinders their writing. We asked them to respond in an open-ended manner to the question: What has helped me improve my writing while at PSC?. A content analysis suggests that the responses fall in four broad categories: sufficient opportunity to write, interventions, helpful teachers, and writing techniques/specific assignments.

Having substantial opportunity to write was most frequently cited by students as being helpful. Typical comments were, *"What has helped me the most is all the writing assignments I have had...The more you do it and the stronger your background the stronger the writer you are...I have had to write many papers for many classes."* Many students' comments concern a particular type of writing that a professor encouraged them to develop and perfect. *"All the education classes I have taken I think have helped me improve as a writer because there is so much writing and I learned to write great opinion papers because of all the practice."*

Students also deemed interventions from classes and writing centers as important. Composition class was mentioned frequently. Courses as diverse as art, earth science, ethics and many education courses were cited by students as helpful. "*My creative writing class made me think about how I was writing and my composition class taught me technical writing.*" Some, but not all, students who used the Reading/Writing Center felt it helped. "*The writing center (helped) because they make you do the writing but help with ways of getting started or brainstorming or structure.*"

Another critical factor in their development as writers, many students felt, was feedback from teachers. Many students gave credit to much-appreciated teachers. "*Having a teacher that really cares.*" When teachers took the time to give high quality

feedback, students felt that their writing benefited greatly, as did their confidence as writers. *"I feel courses which involve a lot of writing and professor feedback helped. Any type of class where the professor takes the time to point out your errors and provide suggestions."* Many students make clear that there is no substitute for a teacher who shows care on a personal level by directly helping students to improve their work. Many students particularly appreciate teacher support, encouragement and positive feedback.

Other areas cited as being important to writing development were specific writing techniques, such as outlining, rubrics, re-writing, and proofing. Specific assignments were also cited, as were journal writing and peer help. Student comments reveal a wide variety of types of writing, such as reports, essays, class observations, journals, research papers, short stories and personal exposition. *"Not only writing papers, but writing observations and assessments helps me put ideas and concepts on paper."* In sum, these comments suggest that high quality, active learning helps students become better writers.

Finally we asked students what they believe detracts from their development as writers. Their responses fell in three broad categories: assignments, mechanics, and professors. Dissatisfaction about assignments was most prevalent. *"The assignments that are true busy work and have no significance except to make us write. There has to be a point behind my writing."* Some students felt cramped by research papers that did not allow them to express themselves personally. *"When I have to write in a way that is short or to the point or professional...it takes away from the emotion and the desire to write a good paper."*

Many students feel that dealing with the mechanics of writing gets in their way. *"I have a very hard time with spelling and grammar. Though I have complete, well*

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developed thoughts, I sometimes have difficulty expressing them." Some of these students felt they could improve if they worked at it; others were clearly frustrated and felt that the struggle with mechanics prevented them from developing other important writing skills. Spelling seems to offer a particularly discouraging obstacle. Another major nemesis for college students was feeling that they just did not have enough time to do their best job on a paper. *"What detracts from my development as a writer is the length of time it takes me to write a paper. I believe I put more time into a paper than the average student."*

There were also numerous complaints about teacher failings, lack of or hurtful feedback, lack of support and what students perceive to be poor teaching. *"Constricting assignments and closed-minded teachers."* When students find that teacher feedback is insufficient, overly negative or confusing, they register a high level of frustration and their writing and their self-concept as writers suffers. *"When a professor only writes check minus, check or check plus, this basically tells me nothing of my writing. What is good and what isn't? If I don't know what to fix I cannot fix it."* Students want specific information from their teachers. *"Lack of feedback--do the teachers even read what we write?"*

In summary, the responses to the two open-ended questions revealed that students find several factors are particularly helpful in writing development: practice; thoughtful, supportive feedback; and interesting assignments. The factors that impede students perceptions of themselves as writers are the belief that assignments are poorly constructed or lack meaning, that they have poor mechanical skills, and that they receive inadequate feedback and support.

Discussion

The writing intervention at PSC includes several steps. These include assessing student writing during orientation, placing lower scoring students into specially designed English Composition classes, and providing on-going support and monitoring by student's advisors. This series of coordinated interventions seems to help students. For instance, we found that overall, relatively few students use the support services/writing centers available to them. Yet these supportive services can provide students the extra attention they need. Our research suggests that non-proficient students benefit most when support services are an integral part of the required English Composition courses. This approach makes the support non-stigmatizing and unavoidable.

There is also evidence to suggest that specialized English Composition classes are perceived quite favorably by students. While 57% of regular English Comp. Students believed their class helped them improve their writing, 70% of students in the specialized classes felt benefited. It very well could be that the combination smaller class size, graduate assistant help, and integrated use of the writing center allow students to perceive that the college truly cares about them as people and writers. It is also possible that the students in the specialized English Composition courses, by virtue of their placement in the courses, had greater need to improve. Other, more proficient students may have felt less need to improve their writing.

Another point of interest from this study is the finding that 78% of students perceived that their writing has improved while in college, but that only 65% thought that their attitudes toward writing improved. Clearly there is a disconnection between the two that we as teacher educators know little about. Improving both areas is important in the

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developmental process we hope to facilitate in pre-service teachers. The students themselves acknowledge as much when they almost unanimously agreed that teachers need to have a positive attitude about writing. Applying the same attitudinal standard to themselves however yielded the same gap. While four in five stated that they themselves had a positive attitude, only two-thirds reported that they liked to write. A great challenge for teacher educators lies not only in helping students improve as writers, but also in assisting them to like the process and feel good about themselves as writers. This academic/writing self-concept in pre-teachers surely influences how they will present and teach writing to their future students. As such, it is an area we need to know more about.

Finally, this study yields clues about pre-service teachers' perceptions of what helps and hinders their development as writers. They believe that continuous practice helps them to significantly improve their writing. The writing must also serve a discernibly meaningful purpose. Students perceive their growth is enhanced when they receive encouragement from their professors as well as accurate feedback and support. External supports, such as a familiar writing center are also helpful. Overall most of the students, including the ones who were initially less able, believe that they have improved their writing skills while at college. On the negative side, students felt that poorly designed assignments and insufficient feedback detracted from their ability to improve. When teachers were critical and not willing to work with students, those students report becoming frustrated and discouraged. Perhaps this frustration and discouragement are variables that relate to the aforementioned lower academic/writing self-concept of pre-service teachers.

Conclusions

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There are limitations to the study described in this article. The investigation was done at one college that exists in a unique environment and with support systems that are perhaps not extant at some institutions. It is not uncommon among faculty to hear and tell stories of student writing ineptitude and decline. An encouraging aspect of these data is that active intervention done in a collaborative way across departments can meet students where they are developmentally in their writing and, in so doing, further their ability to write effectively. Finally, our survey results support the importance, from the students' perspective, of instructors providing constructive and in depth feedback to students on their writing. By effectively intervening to improve student writing, teacher educators can positively influence both the writing skills and attitudes of pre-service teachers.

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(Sidebar)

English Composition: A Collaborative Intervention

After four years of collaboration between Education and English Departments both the English and Education Departments continue to be impressed with the success of our students. Most of this can be attributed to the link that a graduate assistant (GA) provides between the students, the professors and the Reading/Writing Center.

The classes are limited to twenty students; with the participation of the GA in the classroom, each student is afforded much more individual attention, and instruction is tailored to meet the particular needs of each student. In addition, the GA gives students the opportunity to connect with an additional writing consultant who is familiar with their needs and can provide personal instruction and guidance.

The role of the GA in the Reading/Writing Center is equally as important as the role that she/he plays in the classroom. Students are required to attend thirty minute weekly sessions with the GA, and participation in the Center is linked to their grade. In these sessions, the GA works through the writing process with each student to assist him or her in completing each assignment successfully. Ultimately, this individual attention allows students to take charge of their own writing and provides them the freedom to experiment with the writing process.

Student response to the program has been very positive. In fact, many individuals visit the RWC more often than their assigned appointments with the GA. Responses on course evaluations also highlight the high level of satisfaction students have with the classes. Overall, having smaller classes and a GA in the Composition class has been a highly effective means of improving student writing.

Table 1

Question	%S.D.	% Dis.	% Neither	% Agree	% St. Agr.	Mean
Ed. Dept. faculty work to improve my writing	2	8	29	50	11	3.59
Ed. Dept. courses provide sufficient opportunity to improve writing	2	6	19	60	13	3.77
Writing Assessment helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses	7	15	42	24	7	3.09
I use the Reading/Writing or College Writing Center when needed	27	25	18	23	7	2.90
My English Composition class helped me improve my writing	4	16	21	40	11	3.40
I believe my writing has improved over the course of my education at PSC	0	7	14	55	23	4.16
My attitude toward writing has improved over the course of my education at PSC	0	13	23	46	19	3.69
I believe it's important for professionals working with children to be good writers	1	1	6	23	69	4.60
I believe it's important for professionals working with children to have a positive attitude towards writing	0	0	2	27	70	4.68
I have a positive attitude about writing	0	5	13	43	39	4.15
I like to write	4	10	20	30	36	3.86